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A HOUSE OF CARDS.

(By Mrs. B. Lurie.)

CHAPTER V. The Narrative.

"We have in our employ a young man, a certain Simon Harris. He had been with us in many capacities nearly five years when an opportunity presented itself that he was needed as agent at a branch office we opened up in Neosho, Mo. We had been receiving eggs in carlots from this point and reshipping them to Chicago. Now Neosho is situated midway between Kansas City and Chicago. We hit on the plan that, instead of sending the eggs to Kansas City and half-way back again to Chicago, a trusted agent could pay for them right in Neosho and make shipment direct to Chicago. The saving in freight alone was no small item. We were thus enabled to pay a higher price for the stuff and leave ourselves a handsome margin besides. Mr. Disbrow, in looking over our available force, recommended Simon Harris as being most fit for the position. This was, of course, a great compliment, as the young man was not yet of age, and the new post entailed the handling of unlimited sums of money. A very responsible position, truly.

"But we had no fears. We felt the young man justified our confidence. We knew very many complex situations would arise in meeting competition, handling the general merchandise store keepers and the individual farmer, where he was worth while, throughout the territory itself and all that tributary to it. But the boy had always shown splendid judgment, evincing the liveliest interest in the affairs of the firm, and looking out for opportunity to promote its welfare. So different was he from the average automatic office man, performing just enough to keep his position and draw his salary, that both Mr. Disbrow and myself could not fail to notice and appreciate the difference. We studied him from every point of vantage and were well satisfied. He gave us the impression of being clean, orderly and morally sound in every respect, a type of employee a firm hates to part with. The only drawback to his promotion was the danger to the service in our office, as all the force, nearly to a man, hated this Simon Harris for only one reason, that he was a Jew. Times without number we received slanderous reports calculated to injure the reputation of anyone less well behaved and circumspect than this young Jew. But in nearly every instance the reports were traced to jealousy and found to be false. At last we paid no heed to them and this means of petty revenge fell through when found futile. Of course, both Mr. Disbrow and myself never looked on him as our own or the other men's social equal, or that he ever could be. It was not exactly prejudice that gave us this feeling, but simply a Christian's natural disposition to look down on a Jew, no matter in how many respects he be his superior. We knew that there wasn't a man in the house who could touch this Simon in business judgment, but to us that didn't count. His brain power was simply one of the assets of the firm and no more. His powers were a part of the office machinery and for that reason we felt justified in making the best use of them, no matter how strenuously the men objected. We therefore sent him to Neosho and opened up a permanent station there. When told of his appointment, the boy actually cried. We were deeply touched by this evidence of feeling, especially when he confided to us that with his increase in salary he would be enabled to help his widowed mother, who was struggling to pay for their home. He seemed to apply all his savings to this laudable purpose. His devotion to his mother, of course, rebounded to the benefit and safety of the firm. He hinted at some great grief that was preying on his mother's mind, for which he was trying to make amends. What the trouble was we never deemed it our business to inquire. And then our attitude toward him as one not of our faith seemed to make his private affairs less our concern than they would otherwise have been. Aside from our business relations, he was nothing to us. From this lengthy description you will concede that he was a rather safe proposition.

"He went to Neosho, stayed there through the summer and 'made good' in more respects than one. His work and the results exceeded our most sanguine expectations. The profits from the venture were beyond belief. His unflinching energy and devotion to our interests sent him into places for business we never thought of anyone visiting. Our competitors simply could not cope with his industry and business genius. We certainly congratulated ourselves.

"But last September, as a bolt from a clear sky, came a letter from one of our heaviest shippers, stating that our agent was nothing but a drunken bum and a gambler. Also that he had lost nearly a thousand dollars the past Sunday night at cards in the back of a joint where the very lowest element congregated. This sounded right serious, and must have had some foundation in truth for the writer was a very responsible farmer and merchant. I thought it best to keep the matter from Mr. Disbrow for the present, or until I found out more. I rang up his mother and inquired if she had heard from her son as customary. She replied she had not. I told her Simon was in a little trouble, and that I was sending her the letter which would explain the nature of it. I thought this course the wisest, so that in case he had been misusing the firm's money, it were best that those nearest him be not kept in ignorance till too late to make reparation. But it seems his mother cannot read English, for she had her married daughter tell her the contents of the letter. His sister merely withheld the ugliest features, merely telling the anxious mother that her boy had been caught playing cards, which was strictly against our rules. This explanation did not set her fears at rest and caused her such uprightness that she was afraid to face me. The daughter came in the mother's stead.

"Henceforth, this concerns me personally more than the firm. I had, of course, set inquiries afoot to ascertain the extent of the mischief his misadventure entailed. The invariable rule of the house was that once an employee was caught flagrantly violating an important rule, it meant his instant dismissal. This was never deviated from, no matter how efficient the man. He had become unsafe, and the service must dispense with him. You may well imagine that in Simon's case, it could have meant nothing less than dismissal, if not something worse. But he is still with us, and, I think, wonders at his miraculous escape.

"When his sister came the next day, I instantly remembered her as having worked in the district as bookkeeper. I inferred that she was still single, but she speedily undeceived me, informing me that she was married for over five years and was the mother of three children. What surprised me more than anything else was the fact that her name was Winthrop. This you must understand is no Jewish name, and instantly my mind put two and two together, and gave me a clue to the grief that was troubling Simon's mother. The married daughter was not the wife of a Jew. And now this new trouble with the son cropping up, I really felt perplexed how to decide my course of action. But on one thing I immediately determined. Mr. Disbrow nor anyone else in the house must know anything of it. With the help of the sister I intended to adjust it as best we could. I inquired most searchingly into the habits of both families and found the information all that could be desired. She answered all questions with perfect candor, but with the air of a frightened child. Even when I assured her that I would not take any steps immediately that would be harmful to their interest, the terrified look did not leave her eyes. I told her to return on the morrow and I would place before her additional data which I was awaiting from the secret service man.

"That afternoon I wrote Simon to put his affairs in such shape that he might leave for a few days. I did not wish to alarm him, so was very careful to suppress every hint of my knowledge of his escapade. I expected him by the end of the week.

"The following day, promptly at twelve, Mrs. Winthrop returned. Our house was entirely deserted. Everyone but myself had gone to lunch. I noticed she still regarded me with trepidation and looked around fearfully at the deserted offices. I shook her hand most cordially and ushered her into my private office. After a most perfunctory preliminary conversation, I opened my desk and took out several telegrams and a letter. These informed her that her brother had been seen gambling on several other occasions, but had never lost over a few dollars. She looked at me in positive horror. I was sorry to see her so deeply affected. Then she continued reading. She knew this had never interfered with the strict performance of his duty. On the occasion in question, he had, by a mischance, been inveigled into a gambling den where he had lost eight hundred and thirty dollars of the firm's money, besides over a hundred of his own. This was authentic information, and our former friend was not far wrong. Mrs. Winthrop did not speak for some time after she laid the letter and telegrams on the desk.

"Then she leaned forward and said in a terrified whisper: 'This will surely kill mama, if she finds out. And we never dreamed that Simon knew one card from another.'

"Mrs. Winthrop, I pleaded, feeling genuinely sorry for her evident distress, 'please don't agitate yourself so. It may not be so bad, after all. We had best wait till he returns to hear how it happened. I expect a letter from him in tomorrow's mail. Even that, without his presence, may put a better face on the matter.' But plead as I might, she still sat gazing vacantly into space, twisting her hands in unconscious misery, the very picture of despair.

"He has been such a faithful boy, that he may pass safely through this crisis," I continued.

She looked at me in dumb misery, as she answered brokenly: 'That is just it. Mama is just wrapped up in him, he has been so good and faithful since—since papa died.' She hesitated before finishing as if her mind was occupied by some other painful thought.

I drew my chair closer to the desk, picked up the telegrams and letters she had laid down, and looked them once more in my desk. She watched me absently. Her ungloved hand was on the desk near me, trembling visibly in

spite of her efforts to control herself. Then she said quite pitifully: 'This may end up in the penitentiary for him if you feel disposed to prosecute him.'

I laid my hand over hers and said sternly: 'Mrs. Winthrop, I forbid you to conjure up such dreadful fears.'

'I have already assured you that I will proceed most temperately, taking always into consideration his past good conduct and extreme youth. I beg of you not to distress yourself unnecessarily. Go home to your mother and tell her that I can take no further steps till I hear from Simon or see him personally. Let that be my message to her. Also that her son has given us entire satisfaction in the past. As for yourself, I would consider it a great favor if you will return tomorrow to read for yourself what your brother writes.'

With those assurances, I sent her home, feeling a little more at ease. When she was gone, I could not help feeling surprised at my own conduct. I wondered what Mr. Disbrow would think of me for shielding Simon Harris in this unavowed affair. I was also not a little amused at my attitude in consoling his sister with so much solicitude. I seemed to have a peculiar feeling towards her, entirely unaccountable to me, except that I disliked

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